Collateral Regret

By Kaveh Shirazi

"I apologize." In my own words, I pronounced the shame that had festered in my heart and now spilled into the ears of my daughter.

"A monster!" I gasped, my breath becoming shallow and frantic. *How could I?*

I am such an idiot!

I had spent weeks binging on coffee, indulging in marijuana and chocolates, drowning it all out.

"I fucking drowned it all out!"

"God, I'm fucking ruined!" I yelled.

"What is the matter with you, Dad? Are you okay?" she asked, concern laced in her voice.

Well, I thought to myself.

I had been offered $32,000 to launch a barrage of projectiles into Iran. I thought it was a joke.

Now, I am one of the most wanted people in the world.

I was cold and frightened.

The signature of a good surgeon, I mused quietly.

"Nothing, my love," I replied to my daughter.

Yet, fear gnawed at me. My livelihood was destroyed, lost to the sick imagery of war and the cold, soulless abyss of a city jail.

"What an idiot!" I scolded myself.

For years, I had stared at that advertisement, always assuming it was a joke.

Well, I'm going to click it! I had thought.

I'm going to kill innocent people today.

And I did.

Twenty-four hours after the transaction, I went to Starbucks for a caramel coffee. Then, the most disturbing sound filled my ears—

The drowning roar of missiles launching.

"BOOM!"

"BOOM!"

"POW!"

Explosion.

I thought it was just a joke.

Now, I am ruined.

I have ruined my life—
And possibly the life of my daughter.

What am I going to do?

As I sat in that dimly lit coffee shop, watching the foam dissipate from my untouched caramel coffee, my mind spiraled into the past. How had I let it come to this? I wasn’t a killer. I wasn’t a terrorist. I was just an average man, desperate and naive.

The job market had been unkind. My skills, once revered, had been rendered obsolete in a world moving faster than I could catch up. It had been months of overdue bills, of my daughter looking at me with hopeful eyes, waiting for me to provide, and me failing over and over again.

Then I saw the ad.

"Looking for a quick payout? Willing to click a button to change the course of history? $32,000 guaranteed!"

It had to be a scam. It *had* to be.

But desperation makes a man blind. It makes him reckless. It makes him stupid.

So I clicked.

At first, it was harmless. A questionnaire—where I lived, my economic status, my beliefs. Then the terms and conditions, long and filled with legal jargon that I skimmed through, agreeing to whatever it said just to get to the end.

Then, the final button.

Launch.

It didn't say what I was launching. There were no details, no consequences laid out in fine print. Just a button. A simple, stupid button.

And I pressed it.

Now, the news played endlessly on every screen around me. Reports of the devastation. Cities in ruin. Innocent lives lost. And my name, soon to be plastered alongside war criminals, extremists, and radicals.

I gripped the table, nausea rolling in my stomach. My daughter sat across from me, still looking at me with innocent, trusting eyes. She didn’t know. She couldn’t know.

"Dad, are you sure you’re okay?" she asked again.

I forced a smile, but my hands trembled as I lifted the coffee cup to my lips.

"I’m fine, sweetheart," I lied.

Inside, I was already dead.

The weight of my actions sat heavy on my chest, suffocating me. Each breath felt like an admission of guilt. My hands, steady once, were now shaky, restless. I looked at my daughter again, her bright eyes so full of life, so free from the burdens I now carried. If she knew the truth, would she ever forgive me? Would she ever look at me the same way again?

I needed to fix this.

But how do you undo something of this magnitude? How do you atone for a crime so immense that it echoes through history? The thought of turning myself in crossed my mind. Maybe a confession would grant me some sliver of peace. Maybe the world needed to know that I wasn’t some faceless villain hiding behind a screen—I was just a man who made a terrible, irreversible mistake.

But then, what would happen to her?

If I disappeared into a prison cell, who would take care of her? Who would protect her from the world, from the consequences of my actions? She didn’t deserve this. I had to find another way.

I started researching, scouring the dark corners of the internet for anything—ways to disappear, ways to erase digital footprints, ways to escape the fate I had sealed for myself. Every article, every post felt futile. The reach of those in power was infinite. There was nowhere to run.

Paranoia began to settle in. Every time I stepped outside, I felt watched. Every police siren made my heart lurch in my chest. The news reports began hinting at their search narrowing. The government was tracking down those responsible. It was only a matter of time.

I needed to leave.

I pulled my daughter aside one evening, forcing a reassuring smile onto my face.

"We’re going on a trip," I told her.

"A trip? Where?"

"Somewhere new. An adventure. Just you and me."

She grinned, oblivious to the storm raging inside me. "Like a vacation?"

I nodded, though this was no vacation. This was survival.

I packed what little we had, withdrew the remaining money from my account, and left behind the life we knew. We moved from city to city, never staying in one place for too long. I changed my name, grew out my beard, dyed my hair. Every step forward was a desperate attempt to stay one step ahead of the consequences chasing me.

But I couldn’t run forever.

One night, as we sat in a motel room, the weight of it all came crashing down. I looked at my daughter, sleeping soundly, unaware of the chaos surrounding us. I had stolen her innocence. I had taken away her chance at a normal life.

Tears burned my eyes.

"I’m sorry," I whispered, though she couldn’t hear me. "I’m so sorry."

And as the red and blue lights flashed outside our window, as the sound of boots echoed down the hallway, I knew—

It was over.

I had sealed my fate the moment I clicked that button.

I was frightened, and so it came naturally to me to rise up out of my seat and reach for the telephone. My hands trembled as I dialed the familiar number, my breath shallow and uneven. My mind raced with fear, my heart pounding in my chest as the call connected.

"Hello," I said into the receiver, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Hi," responded the comforting but concerned voice of my grandmother.

"I need you here right away!" I pleaded, desperation clawing at my throat. "I need you to take Dkaumi! I need you to take her now!"

I turned on the television, and the breaking news headline flashed across the screen in bold, glaring letters: **NUCLEAR DISASTER IN IRAN.**

My stomach twisted into knots as I watched the horrifying footage. The screen showed chaos—billowing clouds of fire and smoke consuming the Iranian airport. People were screaming, running for shelter, their faces contorted with terror. The earth shook beneath them as explosions ripped through the air.

"Blast!" "Boom!" "Pow!"

The sounds of destruction echoed in my ears as though I were right there, trapped in the inferno. My knees buckled, and I gripped the arm of the couch to steady myself. A suffocating wave of sorrow and guilt washed over me, heavier than anything I had ever known. Why did I feel this way? Was it because I was safe

while so many others suffered? Because I knew that in some way, our world had changed forever? The weight of lamentation exceeded my natural senses, pressing down on my soul like an unbearable burden.

"Ahhhhhhh!" "Ahhhhhhh!" "Ahhhhhhh!" I screamed, my voice raw with agony, but there was no one to hear me. No one to stop the madness unfolding before my eyes.

Just then, a car pulled up into the driveway. I peered through the window with tear-blurred vision. My sister, Klujin Nevirted, stepped out. Her face was pale, her eyes wide with urgency. She had seen the reports on television and had come immediately.

"I’m ready to take Dkaumi to a safe place," she said firmly.

There was no time to hesitate. My daughter, my precious little girl, needed to be as far away from danger as possible. My heart clenched as I watched her gather her things, her innocent eyes filled with confusion and fear. She didn’t fully understand what was happening, but she knew something was wrong.

She climbed into the car, and my sister gave me a reassuring nod before they drove away. I stood motionless in the doorway, watching until their tail lights disappeared down the street. Then, I turned back into the house, feeling hollow and lost.

The silence engulfed me. My legs gave out, and I collapsed onto the floor, my body wracked with sobs.

"Ahhhrghspm mmmbnbm huuugh," I choked on my cries, rocking back and forth as grief overtook me.

"What am I going to do?" I whispered to no one, the question hanging in the air, unanswered, as the world outside burned in chaos.

Hours passed, but time felt meaningless. I sat in the dim glow of the television, watching the destruction unfold on repeat. My mind was numb, my body drained. And yet, somewhere deep inside, a flicker of determination ignited. I couldn't change what had happened, but I could still act. I wiped my tears, took a deep breath, and stood up. It was time to face whatever came next.